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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 003050

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DEPT FOR EUR DAS BRYZA AND EUR/CARC

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: TBILISI ELECTION UPDATE: 12/07/2007

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Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Thirteen Candidates Contest Presidential Election  
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11. (U) Thirteen presidential candidates each submitted more than the 50,000 required voter signatures to the Central Election Commission (CEC) by the December 6 deadline. Mikheil Saakashvili's National Movement Party submitted 205,000 signatures, Oligarch Badri Patarkatsishvili's representatives submitted 202,000. New Rightists Davit Gamkrelidze had 165,000, Labor Party Leader Shalva Natelshvili presented 75,000, Party of the Future candidate Gia Maisashvili submitted 68,000, and United National Council of opposition (UNC) candidate Levan Gachechiladze submitted 63,000. The remaining candidates who met the 50,000 signature threshold are Archil Ioseliani, Russian-leaning Hope Party candidate Irina Sarishvili, Kartlos Garibashvili, Levan Kidzinidze, Giorgi Shervashidze, Avtandil Margiani, and Shalva Kuprashvili. The CEC will check the signatures over the next two days and candidates will have two additional days to address any inaccuracies found by the CEC. After that, the CEC will decide which candidates are eligible. CEC Chairman Levan Tarknishvili announced that the process should be completed by December 11.

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Bakradze Defends Openness of Campaign  
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12. (C) State Minister for Conflict Resolution David Bakradze told the diplomatic corps on December 6 that he is taking a temporary leave of absence to become spokesperson for the presidential campaign of Saakashvili and the United National Movement, as permitted by Georgian law. Bakradze emphasized that the government has a clear will to ensure the election is free and fair. He acknowledged there have been reports of excesses in the pre-campaign period but said they were committed by over-zealous activists and are being quickly dealt with. He said any of the Ambassadors who hear of a problem can call him immediately and he will address it. Most allegations have so far have proven untrue, he said. For example, the Ministry of Internal Affairs followed up a report by an opposition MP who claimed he was attacked by UNM thugs. It turned out to be an incident involving drunken youths. He also responded to an opposition party leader's allegation that his party is blocked from renting office space in the regions. He said he had spoken to the landlord in question and found the claim to be false. Bakradze responded to claims that Saakashvili is misusing administrative resources in his campaign by stating that the UNM is paying for everything: "cars, fuel, helicopters, etc.". The exception is Saakashvili's security detail, which is the government's responsibility. The government gives

other high profile political leaders, including members of opposition parties, security as well. Bakradze promised to provide a list of contracts to prove that the UNM is paying for services, and called on all parties to be equally transparent.

13. (C) Bakradze said the UNM,s intention is to run a positive campaign, focusing on issues rather than character attacks. He asked his audience to note, for example, that there have been no references to connections of other candidates to Russia or criminal backgrounds. He added, however, that if other candidates attack UNM, they would have to respond. Challenged to explain why Saakashvili continues to give orders to ministers from his position as UNM candidate, Bakradze said Saakashvili is doing so not as a government official, but as leader of the party. Bakradze reasoned it is appropriate for a party leader to make sure the party,s officials know and follow party policy, and this is no different than in other democratic systems. (Comment: Bakradze is an eloquent, intelligent and engaging public speaker who will bring a more positive image to Saakashvili,s campaign than other spokespersons, such as Giga Bokeria, whom many voters dislike.)

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Opposition Meets Patarkatsishvili in London  
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14. (C) UNC leaders met with Badri Patarkatsishvili in London on December 6. Republican Party leader Davit Usupashvili told Rustavi 2 TV the discussions would focus on "shaping tactics that might prove advantageous to the opposition." Usupashvili told the Ambassador privately the UNC leaders are asking Patarkatsishvili to withdraw from the election to

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increase support for UNC candidate Levan Gachechiladze.

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Youth Leaders Express Concern About Elections  
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15. (SBU) On December 6, the Ambassador met with an umbrella organization of students representing different opposition parties. The students said they felt they were being singled out for maltreatment and harassment by the police for their activism. Many of them had been detained after the protests on November 7. Practically all of the students insisted that any election Saakashvili wins would be fraudulent. The students also said they fear continued harassment by law enforcement if the National Movement won the election.

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Saakashvili Campaign of Promises Continues  
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16. (U) Former President Saakashvili pledged to set up a state bank to provide affordable, long-term credit to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). He said the government would allocate GEL 300 million immediately and in following years up to GEL 3 billion to make loans available at 4-10 percent interest rates, in comparison to the 16-20 percent that is usual at commercial banks. Saakashvili also announced the opening of business training centers. He said his main task in his next term as president will be to create new jobs and business opportunities, and to "take care of those who cannot work," in the form of increased pensions and vouchers for utilities and the like. At a December 5 rally in the Black Sea port of Poti, Saakasvhili announced that a contract with an operator for Poti's planned free economic zone will be signed next month. Thousands of job seekers have responded to a government job program announced just before Saakashvili left office. The program is having difficulties coping administratively with the demand and with finding employers willing to provide the promised jobs.

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Presidential Debates Planned  
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17. (U) The Georgian Public Broadcasting (GPB) Channel announced plans for twice-weekly debates featuring the presidential candidates. The first debates are scheduled for December 7, but GPB has not announced the participants. Several opposition candidates have said they want a one-on-one debate with Saakashvili but with thirteen candidates in the running, this seems unlikely.

TEFFT